

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 SCS-03

SCA-01 DHA-02 TRSE-00 VO-03 PPT-01 SY-05 OPR-02

DOTE-00 /076 W

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R 291312Z OCT 75

FM AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4554

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: CASC, PFOR, SOPN, HU

SUBJ: U.S. CITIZENS CUSTOMS DIFFICULTIES IN HUNGARY

SUMMARY. EMBASSY HAS NOTED RECURRING PATTERN OF CUSTOMS DIFFICULTIES AT ENTRY BY AMCITS VISITING HUNGARY. UNAWARE OF HUNGARIAN ASSIGNMENT OF INLAND EVALUATION FOR CUSTOMS PRUPOSES, AMERICANS HAVE BEEN EITHER NOT DECLARING OR UNDERDECLARING INEXPENSIVE WESTERN ITEMS, ESPECIALLY POCKET CALCULATORS, BROUGHT IN AS GIFTS. AUTHORITES SUBSEQUENTLY CHARGE THEM WITH "SMUGGLING" AND TAKE AWAY THEIR PASSPORTS, TYPICALLY, FOR TWO OR THREE WEEKS, THEN FINE THEM SEVERAL HUNDRED DOLLARS, AND PERMIT OR REQUIRE THEM TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY. EMBASSY REQUESTS THAT DEPARTMENT TAKE STEPS TO INFORM PROSPECTIVE TRAVELERS TO HUNGARY OF THIS PROBLEM. END SUMMARY.

1. THE WORD IS OUT TO AMERICANS PLANNING VISITS TO HUNGARIAN RELATIVES THAT POCKET ELECTRONIC CALCULATORS ARE A MOST WELCOME GIFT HERE. SUCH ITEMS ARE STILL EXTRAORDINARILY EXPENSIVE ON THE HUNGARIAN DOMESTIC MARKET. A BASIC CALCULATOR COSTING \$25 IN THE U.S. SELLS HERE FOR 7000 - 8000 FORINTS (\$350 -\$400). AMERICANS HAVE BEEN PURCHASING TWO, THREE, AND MORE CALCULATORS TO BRING HERE AS GIFTS, IN THE BELIEF THAT THEY MAY IMPORT UP TO 4000 FORINTS

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(\$200) WORTH OF SUCH ITEMS WITHOUT RESTRICTIONS. BORDER

AUTHORITIES THEN ADVISE THEM IN STERN TERMS UPON ENTRY THAT THE 4000 - FORINT LIMITATION IS ASSESSED PER HUNGARIAN INLAND VALUATION. THEY THEN VALUE THE THREE OR FOUR CALCULATORS AT 25,000 - 50,000 FORINTS, AND ACCUSE THE CITIZENS OF "SMUGGLING." ALTHOUGH THE AMERICANS ARE NOT ACTUALLY ARRESTED, AUTHORITIES TAKE THEIR PASSPORTS, THEREBY RESTRICTING THEIR PERSONAL LIBERTY AT LEAST TO THE EXTENT THAT THEY CANNOT DEPART HUNGARY. OCCASIONALLY AUTHORITIES RESTRICT CITIZENS MORE CLOSELY, TO A GIVEN LOCALITY, OR TO THEIR HOTEL. ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSING TAKES TWO OR THREE WEEKS, THE AMERICAN PAYS A FINE OF TYPICALLY \$250 - \$500, THE "CONTRABAND" IS CONFISCATED, HE RECEIVES HIS PASSPORT BACK, AND DEPARTS.

3. THE EMBASSY LEARNS OF SUCH CASES (NUMBERING ABOUT 29 OVER THE PAST SIX MONTHS) EITHER FROM AN ANGERED OR DISTRAUGHT AMERICAN IN PERSON, OR FROM THE MFA CONSULAR DIVISION. THE LATTER NOTIFICATION INVARIABLY COMES ONLY AFTER THE AMERICAN HAS DEPARTED HUNGARY, AND INEVITABLY DECLARES (A) THAT THE MFA DID NOT PREVIOUSLY KNOW OF THE CASE; AND (B) THAT THE AMERICAN WAS NOT DEPRIVED OF HIS "PERSONAL LIBERTY".

4. TWICE IN THE PAST MONTH AMERICANS, ANGERED BY CUSTOMS HASSLES, HAVE TOLD CONSULAR OFFICER THEY WOULD PUBLICIZE IN THE U.S. PRESS THEIR UNACCEPTABLE TREATMENT BY HUNGARIAN OFFICIALS. CITIZENS REPEATEDLY EXPRESS PARTICULAR PIQUE AT THE "INLAND EVALUATION" TECHNICALITY OF WHICH THEY HAD NO PRIOR KNOWLEDGE (AND WHICH CURRENT HUNGARIAN TOURIST LITERATURE DOES NOT MAKE CLEAR), ALLEGED LACK OF OPPORTUNITY TO DECLARE TO CUSTOMS WHAT ITEMS THEY HAVE WITH THEM, AND, ESPECIALLY, RUDE AND ARROGANT TREATMENT BY THE AUTHORITIES. EX-1956 REFUGEES PARTICULARLY WERE INDIGNANT OVER LAST POINT.

5. ACTION REQUESTED:

(A) DEPARTMENT PLEASE TAKE STEPS TO INFORM PROSPECTIVE TRAVELERS TO HUNGARY OF THIS SITUATION SO THAT THEY ARE AWARE OF THE PROBLEM BEFORE ENTERING THE COUNTRY. DEPARTMENT SHOULD ATTEMPT TO ALERT TRAVELERS TO THE "INLAND EVALUATION" TECHNICALITY, AND SHOULD ADVISE PROSPECTIVE TRAVELERS, WHEN OBTAINING THEIR VISAS, TO INSIST ON CUSTOMS CLARIFICATION FROM HUNGARIAN EMBASSY LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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OR CONSULATE ON ITEMS THEY INTEND TO BRING INTO THE COUNTRY.

(B) IN ORDER TO BUTTRESS REPRESENTATIONS WE HAVE MADE TO MFA, AND TO HUNGARIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR TOURISM HERE IN BUDAPEST EMBASSY RECOMMENDS THAT DEPARTMENT URGE HUNGARIAN EMBASSY IN WASHINGTON AND HUNGARIAN CONSULATE IN NEW YORK TO PROVIDE CLEAR CUSTOMS INFORMATION AT TIME HUNGARIAN VISA IS ISSUED. INFORMATION SHOULD INCLUDE A LIST OF

SUCH REPRESENTATIVE INALDN VALUES AS POCKET CALCULATORS, PORTABLE RADIOS, PORTABLE CASSETTE RECORDERS, QUARTZ AND DIGITAL CLOCKS AND WATCHES, AS WELL AS BASIC COSMETIC ITEMS SUCH AS LIPSTICKS AND MAKEUP MATERIALS. ALL THESE ITEMS ARE NOW, OR SOON WILL BE, IN DEMAND HERE AS GIFTS. EMBASSY HAS ALREADY URGED MFA TO DIRECT HUNGARIAN EMBASSY WASHINGTON AND HUNGARIAN CONSULATE NEW YORK TO PROVIDE SUCH INFORMATION. MFA HAS AGREED VERBALLY TO DO SO BUT, IF IT HAS, WE ARE NOT SEEING THE RESULTS WE SEEK. EMBASSY THEREFORE, ON OCTOBER 29 PRESENTED MEMORANDUM TO MFA FULLY AND FORMALLY REQUESTING THAT GOH ADVISE TRAVELERS OF APPLICABLE CUSTOMS REGULATIONS BEFORE, RPT, BEFORE THEY SET FOOT ON HUNGARIAN SOIL. PARALLEL SUPPORTING REPRESENTATIONS TO AMBASSADOR ESZTERGALYOS BY DEPARTMENT WILL BE OF ENORMOUS ASSISTANCE TO AMCITS, TO USG, AND TO GOH AS WELL. PLEASE ADVISE. MCAULIFFE

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: CITIZEN PROTECTION, SMUGGLING, ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT, HARASSMENT, CUSTOMS CLEARANCES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 29 OCT 1975
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: CunninFX
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975BUDAPE03515
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750376-0557
From: BUDAPEST
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t19751011/aaaaajmm.tel
Line Count: 131
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: CunninFX
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 04 JUN 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <04 JUN 2003 by BoyleJA>; APPROVED <10 OCT 2003 by CunninFX>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
06 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: U.S. CITIZENS CUSTOMS DIFFICULTIES IN HUNGARY SUMMARY. EMBASSY HAS NOTED RECURRING PATTERN OF CUSTOMS
TAGS: CASC, PFOR, SOPN, HU, US
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 06 JUL 2006